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ABSTRACT

This script, which portrays a discussion by a five-person committee about whether to grant tenure to a faculty member, is a vehicle for discussing the meanings of scholarship and standards, the nature of truth and realism, and the constructivist view of learning. The argument about the quality of the faculty member's scholarship leads into a consideration of whether she is being judged by white male standards. The discussion evolves into a consideration of realist philosophy, the meaning of truth, and the prevalence of a dialogical coherence philosophy. The construction of meaning is explored briefly before the characters adjourn to consider the tenure question at a later date. (SLD)

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Title:

The Tenure Decision: A Readers Theater on Constructivism

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(Dean's conference room. Four people sit around a table, shuffling papers.)

THE DEAN: We're only waiting for Dewey. I hope he remembered the meeting.

MICHELE: I saw him in the hall a moment ago. He's on his way, I think.

DEWEY: (entering quickly, and sitting down) I apologize for being late. I stayed after class to discuss some issues with a few students.

HARRY: Very commendable.

THE DEAN: Well, now that we're all here, let's get started. The purpose of this Appointments Committee meeting, as you know, is to decide whether or not to recommend a faculty appointment for Linda Esteban. We've talked about this matter before at some length, and you've all had a chance to look over the file. The evaluations, both of Linda's teaching and of her scholarship, are very good. I'd have to say that this looks like quite a clear-cut decision to me. Do we need further discussion?

HARRY: I'm afraid so. I'd like to raise an issue that's troubled me all year—but I think it's particularly pertinent to this candidate. Let me come right to the point: I have very serious doubts about this candidate's scholarship—hers in particular, but also about the way we evaluate scholarship in general. Do we even have any criteria or standards anymore for distinguishing good scholarship from bad scholarship?

THE DEAN: Well, I've certainly assumed that we do.

HARRY: I've assumed the same thing, but I'm beginning to wonder. At our last meeting, Dewey and Michele reported on Linda's articles, and they both said her scholarship was excellent. I decided to look at a couple of the articles, and my reaction was different. In fact, it's hard for me to imagine how a reasonable person could say this work is good. That's what leads me to wonder about our standards—if we have any.

Here's how I would characterize the articles. There was a lot in them that seemed calculated to convince readers that the author is a good, moral, compassionate person who is deeply grieved by the injustices that Western civilization has inflicted upon racial minorities and women. I'll concede—although I can't really know—that these expressions were perfectly sincere. There was also a lot in the articles that seemed designed to establish the author's credentials as a member of a class that has been victimized or oppressed. All of this presumably relates to the question of "voice"—the author assures us that she speaks with the proper "voice."

I'll concede that much too; the author has the right "voice" (whatever that means). But it still seems to me that a scholar has an obligation to use her voice to say something coherent and significant. And that's where the articles fail. They have the right "voice," maybe; and they use the right postmodern/critical/feminist vocabulary. But they just don't say anything significant.

MICHELE: Getting a little carried away, aren't we, Harry?

HARRY: Okay, I've overstated my point. I agree that the articles make a number of claims that, if true, would be very significant. The basic problem is that there is almost no effort to back up those claims with anything like evidence or careful analysis. There are also what I take to be some philosophical positions implicit in the articles; but once again, far from articulating those positions and then making serious arguments for them, the author doesn't

appear to understand what they are or where they come from. In the end, the articles seem more like ventilation than reasoned argument. It's as if she's saying, "Look, I'm a sensitive person, and I've been oppressed, and here's my opinion"—and we're supposed to just accept it. But if you forget for a moment about the "voice" and the indignation and just look at the substance—the arguments made and the way they are or aren't supported—these articles would barely get "Bs" in a freshman writing course. I ought to know; I used to teach freshman writing classes before I went to Florida State.

MICHELE: Frankly, Harry, it strikes me that your own speech shows that these articles have more to them than you give them credit for. In fact, you're acting as Exhibit "A" for Linda's thesis in her most recent article. You're applying traditional white male criteria to an author who takes a different perspective, and as a result you're dismissing her without really even hearing what she's trying to say.

HARRY: I knew someone would say that; in fact, that's why I've kept quiet about these issues up until now. Anyone can use that rhetorical trick. Just call something "white male," and it doesn't matter what it is—traditional classrooms, teachers, instructional-design models, why not computers?—you think you've discredited it. For some reason—I can't quite figure it out—no one ever seems to remember that Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Rousseau were all white males too.

ARIEL: So were Gadamer, Habermas, Derrida, and Foucault.

HARRY: No offense intended, but I think that argument is just a cover for intellectual laziness. And I'm not buying it anymore. When I say that these articles are vacuous, I'm not applying "white male" criteria. I'm judging them by their merit—or by their lack of merit.

MICHELE: A kinder, gentler term for the same thing. "Merit" according to white male standards.

HARRY: That's not true. When someone says that scholars ought to back up claims with evidence, or that they ought to reason and analyze instead of just emoting, or that they ought to follow through on the logic of what they've said without contradicting themselves, those are not in any sense "white male" standards. They are simply objective standards for good scholarship, no matter who's doing it.

DEWEY: Let me jump in here, if I may. This discussion has all been very interesting. And I think Harry's last statement is especially revealing; it's also ironic, in view of his earlier complaint about Linda Esteban's lack of philosophical sophistication or self-awareness. Because it seems that Harry has his own tacit philosophical assumptions that he may not have examined very carefully. He has a sort of metaphysics and epistemology that we might describe as "realist."

HARRY: I don't accept that. As a matter of fact, I don't even know anything about philosophy, except for the little—very little, I assure you—that I remember from the survey philosophy course I took as an undergraduate. So I don't have any particular philosophical views at all. We instructional designers manage quite nicely without any, thank you.

DEWEY: You're being too modest, Harry. Actually you're more of a philosopher than you realize.

HARRY: Me—a philosopher? Now that's really hitting below the belt.

MICHELE: I was under the impression that the purpose of this meeting was to discuss whether Linda Esteban should be appointed—not whether Harry is a closet philosopher.

Perhaps we could get back to business?

HARRY: And just leave Dewey's slanderous accusation unexplained and unanswered?

ARIEL: I'm interested. What did you mean, Dewey?

DEWEY: Just this—and I'll be succinct about it, Michele.
It's true that Harry hasn't explicitly endorsed any metaphysical position, of course. But think about what's assumed in his notions of "merit," "reasoned argument," and especially his insistence on supporting assertions with "evidence." Harry has been less than clear about what would count as evidence, but it seems pretty obvious that things like "voice" and personal perspective aren't evidence. Those first person aspects are entirely distinct from what Harry calls the "substance" of the articles, and they don't count towards establishing the "truth" of what an author like Linda asserts. Other things—like controlled experiments with lots of statistics—apparently do count. But what are the background assumptions that would lead Harry to take a position like this?

HARRY: I don't know. Since Dewey seems to understand my philosophical views better than I do, maybe he'll explain to me what they are.

DEWEY: I'll be happy to try. Harry assumes that there is some sort of reality "out there"; it exists independent of the person who is talking about it. And a statement is "true" if it accurately describes, or corresponds to, that reality. That's why Harry can think that his standards of merit are "objective." The scholar is not trying to impose anything, any values or goals or biases, onto reality; she is just trying to describe it. And she shows that she has given a correct description by supporting her statements with evidence, with careful logical analysis, and so forth. Just "emoting," or "ventilating," aren't helpful; they tell us nothing at all about the "object" being described, whatever that is; they only tell us about the subject, or the speaker. So as far as objective description goes, these kinds of expression only clutter things up. Am I getting your position right, Harry?

HARRY: I don't want to be pinned down to any philosophical position, particularly one supplied by you, Dewey. But in this case, I'll have to admit that what you said sounded pretty much correct. That's just common sense; everyone acknowledges that a "true" statement is one that accurately describes what it's talking about.

DEWEY: No, not everyone does. But let me continue. Harry's unreflective metaphysical and epistemological assumptions—which I think we can refer to collectively as "realism"—express one possible philosophical position. And of course that position, in its various versions, has some venerable names associated with it: Descartes, Bacon, Locke. It probably also expresses the view that ordinary people typically take, at least when they haven't given much thought to the philosophical issues involved. And a realist position can support certain criteria of "merit" for judging scholarship. That's the good news (for Harry).

But here's the bad news. The realist understanding of truth is only one possible philosophical position—not the only one. And I would say that today, very few philosophers or academics interested in these issues accept the "realist" position. In fact, I would go further and suggest that the "realist" position has been thoroughly discredited. So it turns out that while Harry criticizes Linda Esteban for, among other things, not understanding her philosophical presuppositions, his own criticisms arise out of philosophical assumptions that *he* doesn't seem to have examined —and that in fact are thoroughly outdated.

THE DEAN: Well, Harry, I guess you've been put in your place.

HARRY: I don't think so. Dewey hasn't shown what's wrong with the standards that I (and,

until recently, all of us) want to apply—with standards that suggest that you should back up your assertions with evidence, with careful logical analysis, and so forth. All he's done is attribute to me a particular philosophical position and then report that the position isn't popular with philosophers at the moment. As far as I'm concerned, that's *their* problem—and Dewey's. Unless, that is, he can show me some plausible philosophical position other than the "realist" one and explain how under that alternative position something like supporting assertions with evidence isn't a valid standard.

ARIEL: That sounds like a challenge.

MICHELE: Yes, I'm afraid it does. And of course it would be unmanly to let a challenge go unanswered. So if you'll excuse me, I'll be back in a moment. It's clear I'm going to need some caffeine.

THE DEAN: There's some soda in the fridge. Help yourself.

MICHELE: I'm very grateful. I'm sure I wouldn't have wanted to miss out on any of this discussion.

II

DEWEY: Well, I can't accept the challenge in quite the terms that Harry used just now, but I'll try to deal with the problem he raises. Let's start with Harry's notion of what it means for a statement to be "true" and see where things lead. Harry thinks that a statement is "true" if it accurately describes—or agrees with, or corresponds to—some independent reality. Now if we think about it, isn't it clear that this can't be what "truth" means?

HARRY: I don't see why it can't.

DEWEY: For a number of reasons. But the main problem, I think, is that if the realist notion of truth were the correct one, we'd never be able to know whether a statement is really true. And a conception of "truth" that leaves us completely unable to know whether any given statement *is* true wouldn't be too helpful, would it?

ARIEL: I'm not following. Why does a realist definition of truth leave us unable to know whether a given statement is true?

DEWEY: Mainly because of what you might call the "no getting out of your own skin" problem. Let's take a very simple example—the kind of example, in fact, that's most favorable to Harry's view. Suppose I say something like "The chair in the corner is brown." By Harry's account, my statement is true if, independent of me, there is in fact a chair in the corner and it is in fact brown. (We'll leave aside for now the additional problem that the very ideas of "chair" and "brown" are human constructs.) Now, in order to verify those facts—i.e., that there is a chair "out there" and that it is brown—I'd need to be able somehow to step outside myself, set my statement about the chair alongside the chair itself (or whatever there may be "out there"), and see if they match. Obviously, I can never do that. Like it or not, I'll always be stuck inside myself.

ARIEL: That's certainly true. But you could, if you were really worried about this, ask me to check out the chair for you. I'm outside your skin. I could verify your statement for you.

DEWEY: We could do that, yes. But notice that your suggestion doesn't solve my problem.

If you tell me that the chair in the corner is brown, then I would have two things to work with: my own initial perception, and now your report as well. What I wouldn't have—never could have—is the ability to match my perception and my statement of my perception against the chair itself. And you can't do that for me, because you can't get outside your skin either.

ARIEL: So then we're right back where we started?

DEWEY: Not quite. I do have something else to check my statement against—Your statement. Now suppose we bring ten more people in here, and they all say, "Yes, the chair in the corner is brown." We'd be pretty confident then in saying that my initial statement—"The chair in the corner is brown"—is "true." But here's the crucial point: We would say the statement is true not because we (individually or collectively) could match the statement against the chair itself. What we match up, rather, is our statements. In other words, what we would really mean in saying that my statement is "true" is that it fits well—coheres, we might say—with other people's statements and beliefs, not that it matches or agrees with the object itself. Truth, we might say, is a product of dialogue—a sharing and comparing of statements and beliefs—and the working criterion of truth is dialogical coherence, not objective correspondence.

ARIEL: So instead of a "realist" theory of truth, we have a "dialogical coherence" theory. Is that what you're saying?

DEWEY: That's about right. Of course, what I've given here is only the skeleton of a theory. Different people would flesh it out in lots of different ways. But I think it's fair to say that most philosophers today, and most educational theorists who have thought seriously about these issues, subscribe to some version of a dialogical coherence theory. The common element lies in the recognition that we don't discover truth by reading it off of an objective reality; instead we construct truth—through dialogue.

HARRY: And it follows, I suppose, that in a dialogical coherence theory of truth, standards like "Support your assertions with evidence" have to be discarded?

DEWEY: Not at all. That's what always happens; someone hears that a "realist" theory of truth has been criticized, and they immediately attribute all kinds of dire consequences and outlandish implications to an alternative position. Actually, standards like Harry's would still have their place in a dialogical coherence theory. But their significance would be a little different.

HARRY: You'll elaborate, I'm sure.

DEWEY: Of course. Once we understand that truth is a product of dialogue, then we can also see that within any particular community that engages in dialogue, there will be certain practices that govern the making and acceptance of statements. These practices might vary from one community to another. In one community, the practice might be that statements ought to be consistent with some sacred scripture. In another community—one heavily influenced by the methodologies of empirical science, for instance—practice might demand that statements be supported by evidence gained through sensory perception. Since these practices determine the kinds of statements that can be made and accepted, they will naturally determine what, for that community, can be accepted as "true." In our own community, it happens that we have developed a practice that expects people to make statements that can be supported with "evidence,"—usually empirical—although I'd suggest that we're not too clear about what counts as evidence. Still, the standard Harry invokes is perfectly understandable and even, in the sense I've been describing, legitimate.

But there is a lot more to be said now. In the first place, the standards accepted by a given

dialogical community reflect the practices of that community. So it would be misleading to assume that these practices or standards are "neutral" or "objective" in any larger or universal sense.

Also, the practices of a community will make it difficult for someone coming from a different community governed by different practices to speak, or to be understood, in the first community. In that sense, the standards of truth that are grounded in those practices will operate to exclude. So when Michele refers to Harry's standards as "white male" standards, she has a valid point. Harry doesn't need to take offense; Michele isn't saying that Harry's standards are wrong in any ultimate sense. Indeed, she couldn't say that, because to say it would presuppose the same kind of untenable objectivist, universalist assumptions that Harry himself is implicitly using. But Harry's standards are based on practices that happen to have prevailed in a dialogical community composed mainly of white males.

Harry: So everything's relative? How then can we say anything is really true?

Dewey: Oh, I can say it all right. It's true that we're all sitting here talking. I believe it's really true. But the meaning of 'true' means something a little different to me than it means to you. If you mean "True"—with a capital "T"—then I'm not sure anyone's got a handle on that completely.

Another thing—Once standards are understood to be grounded in practices that are contingent—by that I mean that the practices might be different, and in fact are different, from one community to another—then it also follows that the practices and standards become eligible for reexamination and, possibly, for change. And something else follows that is vital to the general question Harry raised about evaluating scholarship. If we understand that truth results from dialogue, from talking together, not from comparing statements with some independent reality, then we will naturally be much more concerned with the participants in the conversation. Who gets to participate? What kind of people are doing the talking? How do these people perceive and describe things? What kind of language, or what kinds of conceptual schemes, do they use? I could put it differently: Once we realize that truth is constructed, we naturally become interested—primarily interested, I might even say—in who's doing the constructing. So all of these "first person" questions about "voice" and who the speaker is— questions that in Harry's realist view can be quickly brushed aside because they don't bear directly on the objective "truth" of what is said—come to be vitally significant.

THE DEAN: So, Harry, are you ready to concede the point?

HARRY: Very amusing. No, I'm not convinced. I think Dewey's just given us a fine example of sophistry to try to get us to relinquish what we all know. But I can't articulate off the top of my head just what the mistake in Dewey's argument is; I'm not a philosopher, after all.

III

THE DEAN: Well, then, perhaps we can get back to business and consider the question of Linda Esteban's appointment. Any further discussion?

ARIEL: Actually, before we discuss the specifics of Linda's candidacy, I'd like to explore Dewey's argument a little further. Would that be appropriate?

THE DEAN: Well, you realize this is supposed to be an Appointments Committee meeting,

not a gathering of the Socratic society.

MICHELE: Couldn't you and Dewey resume this discussion later?

ARIEL: We could, and if no one else wants to continue this discussion, I'll just drop it. But Dewey did tell us that these philosophical questions bear directly on the standards that we should apply in evaluating scholarship. If that's right, and since the issue has been raised, it seems to me that we ought to pursue this a little further.

THE DEAN: I'll defer to the other members of the Committee. But remember that some of us may have to leave. The more time we spend on metaphysics, the less likely it is that we'll be able to make a decision on Linda Esteban today. And if we don't move quickly, we're likely to lose her.

DEWEY: I share the Dean's concerns. But I'd hate to truncate discussion if some people think it's relevant to our decision.

HARRY: I'm willing to listen a little longer. Especially if this discussion will spare me from reading all the articles that ought to be in philosophy journals but have somehow gotten into the Ed Tech journals.

THE DEAN: I wouldn't count on it. But it sounds like you have leave to go ahead, Ariel. Let's just try to be as efficient as possible.

ARIEL: I will. This is my difficulty: I can accept some of what Dewey said, but not his relativism or his total rejection of truth as correspondence. He insists that "truth" is constructed; and in one sense that seems right. After all, truths have to be expressed in language, and language is socially constructed. (Although I have to admit that "constructed" doesn't seem to be quite the right word; it implies that we have more conscious control over the process than we actually do, I think.) And our statements about what we think is true will naturally use the concepts and categories and theories that are available to us, and those are also constructed. If that's all that Dewey means, then I could probably just agree with him.

Dewey: What I mean is that the meaning of things is within us, not within the things themselves.

ARIEL: Well Dewey, I still don't see why you have to reject the realist view of truth. It seems to me that I can admit that truth is "constructed" in the ways I've mentioned and still maintain that a statement is true if it accurately describes the thing it's talking about.

DEWEY: But it's like an endless circle, trying to figure out what 'accurately describes' means in any purely objective sense.

ARIEL: Let me give an example: Suppose Dewey says, "The Dean weighs 180 pounds."

THE DEAN: Now I'm getting interested. And if Dewey can come up with a theory that makes that statement true, I'll see to it that he gets an instant promotion.

HARRY: I'm afraid that would be beyond even Dewey's sophistical powers. Philosophizing is never going to replace dieting.

ARIEL: It's a purely hypothetical example. My point is this. In some senses, the truth of Dewey's statement—we'll fantasize that it is true—might be said to be "constructed." After all, the statement doesn't even mean anything except in a language that is socially

constructed. And it uses concepts— 'pounds,' for instance—that are socially constructed. 'Pounds' as a term of measurement is a human invention; we might just as easily talk about 'kilos' or something else. The Dean doesn't come with a number of pounds written on him.

DEWEY: I'm with you so far.

ARIEL: My point is that none of this seems to mean that we have to abandon a realist notion of "truth." It seems more sensible to say that what a statement means is a matter of convention or social construction; but whether the statement is true still depends upon whether it accurately describes or agrees with its object. In this case, unfortunately, it probably doesn't.

But Dewey apparently believes that because in certain senses all true statements are "constructed," we therefore have to give up the idea that truth depends upon agreement of a statement with the "reality" it describes. Instead, a statement is true if it coheres with—I'm not too clear on just what that means—other statements and beliefs commonly expressed and accepted in the dialogue of a given community. Isn't that more or less what you were saying?

DEWEY: More or less. But I don't think you can take the meaning out of a statement and judge it purely on its 'truth' value. What does it mean for something to be true if the meaning of it is unclear? You're using 'truth' in a very narrow sense that robs it of its richness; I'm not sure what you've got left after meaning is separated out.

ARIEL: Well, it seems to me that your understanding of truth clashes in all sorts of ways with what everyone understands 'truth' to mean.

DEWEY: It very well may. But can you be more concrete?

ARIEL: For instance, most people would think, to use your example, that you can say "The chair in the corner is brown" and your statement is true or false regardless of whether anyone else comes into the room and agrees. Suppose you yourself placed the chair in the corner on Monday morning and observed that the chair in the corner was brown, and then the building burned down so that no one else ever saw it. According to your theory of "dialogical coherence,' it seems, your observation would just be hanging out there; it would never be true or false because there would never be any dialogue to confirm or disconfirm it. But that seems crazy; no one believes that.

DEWEY: But whether we like it or not, we are in the world, and in conversation with people past and present. Our culture is the context within which we perceive chairs and everything else in this world. I may never have talked to anyone about the chair, but my actions, beliefs, and thoughts about it are all conditioned by my participation in the world.

ARIEL: OK, I'm starting to see your point. But let's take a different example that's close at hand. The Dean says, "There's pop in the refrigerator." What that statement means depends, I agree, upon conventions of language and and practice that are socially constructed. But does the truth of the statement depend upon coherence within a cultural context? I don't think so. It would be just as "coherent" to say, "There isn't any pop in the refrigerator." The truth of the statement depends on whether there is in fact a fridge "out there," and whether it in fact has pop in it.

Or suppose I say, "The Yankees will win the pennant this year," and nobody else agrees. Does that mean my statement is false? Even the people who think the Yankees don't have a chance wouldn't say that. They would say that my statement is probably false, but that we won't really know for sure until we see who actually does win the pennant. And even then, if my statement turns out to be false, it won't be because other people disagreed with it. It will

be because the Yankees didn't win.

DEWEY: I think I can see at least part of your point, Ariel. There seems to be a part of what we mean by 'truth' that depends on correspondence with the way things are, with the outside world. That's the common sense view of things, I admit, and it's often useful. But let me make two points. First of all, you will never really know whether the Yankees win the pennant except by comparing your prediction with what other people say about who won the pennant. You'll always be comparing your statement not with some objective reality, but rather with other people's statements. Just as you would in the case of the chair.

ARIEL: True, but I think that misses the point. It seems to me that you're confusing two separate questions. One question is what it means for a statement to be "true." To put it differently: What is it about a statement that makes the statement true or false? And the answer to that question, I submit, is that a statement is true if it accurately describes what it is talking about.

DEWEY: I would prefer "faithfully." True statements faithful describe or interpret to what they're talking about. They do justice—not violence—to the subject at hand.

ARIEL: The second question is how do we verify, or how do we go about deciding, whether a statement is true. We can't, as you say, step out of our skins and lay our statement alongside the object itself—and I very much doubt whether anyone ever thought we could. So we use other methods. One of those methods—although certainly not the only method—is to compare our beliefs and perceptions with other people's beliefs and perceptions. That's a method for determining whether a statement is true. And I agree that dialogical coherence makes good sense as one method of confirming or disconfirming statements. But another legitimate method is to look for a correspondence between the thing and what's said about it.

DEWEY: So we're headed towards a dual—or multiple—theory of truth are we? Truth can mean different things, and we use different methods to show it. I guess I'm not strong enough to resist you.

IV

MICHELE: Now that's one point I've got to agree with. But it seems to me that both of you have absorbed too much philosophy.

DEWEY: What do you mean?

MICHELE: Just notice what's happened. The question we started off with was whether it's appropriate to judge Linda Esteban's scholarship by "white male" standards. Dewey thought he was taking the open-minded, liberal, enlightened view by arguing that we shouldn't, and that the standards Harry holds so dear are not really "objective" or "neutral." If he had stopped at that, things would have been fine. But instead, he had to go ahead and offer a full-blown philosophical analysis of what was wrong with Harry's position, and then to suggest a philosophical alternative. And you can see where that leads; Dewey just set himself up to be taken apart. In the meanwhile, we've made no progress toward answering the initial question.

DEWEY: I beg your pardon. Mea culpa. Although what I offered was hardly a "full-blown philosophical analysis." Anyway, what should I have done, Michele?

MICHELE: You should have noticed that Harry's insistence on applying "merit" criteria wasn't a PhilosoPhical position at all—as he himself made clear. Harry was taking a political position. And the proper response, therefore, is a political response. Turning the issue into a matter of philosophy just diverts attention from the real problem—and dignifies Harry's position at the same time.

DEWEY: I'm still not sure what you mean. It seems to me that Harry's belief in a particular set of "merit" criteria does reflect some implicit philosophical assumptions—and that it's useful to bring those assumptions out into the open. How else are we supposed to decide whether Harry's position is correct?

MICHELE: And I suggest that you've gotten trapped in a philosophical approach to the world. And the result is that however good your intentions may be, you'll wind up endorsing something like Harry's position, even if you do it unwittingly. As Ariel has just shown. And, in fact, as the statement you just made reflects. After all, identifying and examining an author's underlying assumptions is precisely the kind of thing that Harry thinks good scholarship ought to do. Isn't that right, Harry?

HARRY: It's one thing good scholarship often does, yes. And I'm glad to see that whichever route we take, we seem to end up back at something like my position.

MICHELE: Oh, no. I haven't admitted that. There is another alternative—quite an obvious one, really.

HARRY: Which is?

MICHELE: To appreciate, as I said a moment ago, that Harry's position is really political in nature, and that we should respond accordingly.

DEWEY: Could you explain that a little more clearly?

MICHELE: Well, I agree with Dewey, of course, that it isn't appropriate to judge all scholarship by Harry's so-called "merit" standards. And I also agree that Harry's standards probably reflect (even though he doesn't realize it) a "realist" or "objectivist" understanding of truth. But what we need to ask about Harry's standards, and his realist understanding, is not whether they are "true"—even to who knows what exact that means!—but rather what political consequences follow from them.

When we ask that question systematically, it soon becomes apparent what the actual significance of realism is. It's a device for justifying structures of power and oppression. People in power have always used it that way. The medieval church that tortured and persecuted heretics, the New England Puritans who executed witches and Quakers, the "enlightened" Founders who defended slavery and wrote it into the Constitution and who left women dependent and disenfranchised—the ruling powers have always justified their position and their oppressive practices on the basis of a realist metaphysic. What they were doing was always in accordance with some "objective" truth. And the use of "objective" academic standards today to denigrate the scholarship of women and scholars of color is just one more example of this venerable practice. It's just one of the little ironies of history that the most articulate defender of "realism" in this room today happens to be a woman.

ARIEL: Alright, then let's play your game for a while. We won't talk philosophy, just politics and power. You say that people in power have always used realism to justify their position; they've defended their practices on the basis of so-called "objective" truths. I admit that—cheerfully. But isn't it also true that people who have resisted or opposed power and oppression have also done so on the basis of what they believed to be "objective" truths? The

abolitionists invoked—fiercely—what they believed to be an objective higher law. When they said slavery was morally abominable, they weren't just saying that they didn't have a taste for it, or that their own power would be enhanced by the elimination of slavery; they were saying it was wrong. The same was true of those who worked for civil rights in this century. When they argued that segregation was unjust, or that blacks were the physical and intellectual and moral equals of whites, they weren't just making a power grab. Nor were they reporting on the outcome of a search for dialogical coherence; on the contrary, what they said often was not compatible or coherent with views and beliefs widely accepted in American culture. They were asserting what they believed to be true—in a realist sense. Am I wrong?

DEWEY: Michele, is it OK if I act like a male and butt in on this? I know you don't like philosophy, but this question needs a philosophical answer.

MICHELE: Go ahead, Dewey, but my turn next.

DEWEY: Ariel, I'm afraid you're confusing a realist position with a person being committed to the belief that certain things are true. Realism is not the only path to truth or to a person believing they're right. Non-realists aren't sitting out there with no principles, no beliefs, and no truth. Believe it or not, there are postmodern thinkers out there who are social activists, religious and political reformers, persons totally engaged in the affairs of this world.

ARIEL: Still, it seems to be true that both those in power and those who are resisting power have been realists.

MICHELE: Historically that's been true, but realism has been the dominant worldview of past centuries. I think that's changing, though, with more dissident and activists groups showing a variety of views about the world. But that's probably beside the point. The point is that an objectivist realism tends to favor those in power over those out of power.

ARIEL: Well it also seems true, almost by definition, that people with power will more often prevail over people without power. But I'm not sure what that tells us about realism. In fact, I'm not sure whether there's much of a connection at all between realism and struggles over power. You might as well say, "Human beings breathe air," and "The world is unjust." Both statements may be true, but there's not much connection between them. And it would be just plain silly to link the statements and then conclude that we ought to take a stand against breathing air.

MICHELE: I'm afraid that's a rather poor analogy. The difference, obviously, is that there is a connection between realism, or a belief in an "objective truth," and power. And if we could dissolve realism, if we could expose the fallacy of "objective truths," then at least one weapon that the powerful typically use to their advantage would be eliminated.

ARIEL: Yes, I suppose you're right that there is a connection between realism and power. I retract my analogy. But I still think that abandoning realism would hurt the powerless more than the powerful.

MICHELE: But just a moment ago you said the opposite. You agreed that realism favors the powerful more often than it favors the powerless. "Almost by definition," you said.

ARIEL: Let me explain. What I said was that almost by definition those with power will usually prevail over those without it. That's what it means to have power. But it doesn't follow that realism is what allows the powerful to prevail. Quite the opposite, in fact. The powerful don't need truth. After all, they already have power; they have clubs, or bullets, or money. It's the powerless who need truth because, to use your metaphor, it's the only weapon

they have.

MICHELE: That's wonderful idealistic rhetoric. Unfortunately, it doesn't work very well in the real world. Fundamentalists, for example, are surely realists, yet they tend to be among the most militant of peoples. Realism and power tend to go hand in hand. You say the powerful don't need truth since they have power. But their biggest fear is that they might lose power, so they take great pains to control how the story is told. And since they believe in only One True Story, they have a vested interest in realism as a vehicle for preserving the status quo.

The logic goes something like this:

—There is only One True Way of seeing things.
—The Ruling Society tells things that way—the way things are.
—If you don't conform to the Ruling Society's story, then there is something wrong with you.

DEWEY: So here we are back to a healthy pluralism. Out of our little dialogue some truths seem to have emerged. Ariel has persuaded me to admit a role for correspondence in thinking about truth, and Michele has shown the pragmatic and political dangers of an objectivist view that discourages multiple perspectives. I'm not sure if I'm postmodern, but I can definitely see some value in pluralism.

THE DEAN: I'm sorry to have to interrupt at this point. This has been an illuminating discussion, I'm sure. However, I mentioned that some people might have to leave, and in fact I have a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor in about five minutes, so I'm afraid we're going to have to adjourn without reaching a decision on the matter at hand. And I don't think we should wait too long on this. Can I just ask: How soon do you all think you may be ready to make a decision on this matter?

MICHELE: I'm ready to vote right now.

HARRY: I'm not. But I do have a request. If Dewey and Ariel would make up a reading list naming what they each regard as the ten most important books on the nature of "truth," I'll study those just as soon as I find the time. Then I'll be prepared to vote.

ARIEL: And by then the rest of us will have passed into the realm of higher truth.

MICHELE: You see where philosophy leaves you.

THE DEAN: Seriously, could we meet tomorrow at noon for about an hour? I'll provide lunch. That will give Harry almost 24 hours to figure out the nature of truth.

DEWEY: That should be plenty of time for him. Even though he'll have to interrupt his ruminations for a half-hour to catch "The Simpsons."

HARRY: It won't be an interruption. That's probably where I'll find the answer.

ARIEL: If it comes to that, then on this issue—and only on this issue—I'd advise you to trust Bart's judgment. Not Lisa's.

HARRY: Don't worry. I'd have done that anyway.

MICHELE: We know.

THE DEAN: I'll see you all tomorrow. At noon.

(Meeting concludes.)

Author Notes

Brent G. Wilson is associate professor of instructional technology, University of Colorado at Denver. Steven D. Smith is professor of law, University of Colorado at Boulder. This paper is based on an earlier manuscript written by Steven for a law audience. Brent has adapted the paper to suit an educator audience, and has adapted the content to reflect more of a postmodern orientation. Brent Wilson assumes responsibility for this version of the paper. Paul Campos, Richard Delgado, Ann Estin, Chris Mueller, Bob Nagel, Gene Nichol, and Pierre Schlag provided valuable observations, recommendations, and protestations.